

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS PINT ET

SUBJECT: ERITREA: A POLITICAL AND MILITARY OVERVIEW

1. SUMMARY: AS THE RAINY SEASON BEGINS TO WIND DOWN AND THE WEATHER IS IMPROVING, IT APPEARS THAT THE INSURGENTS HAVE TAKEN ONLY MINIMAL ADVANTAGE OF THE WEATHER AND OTHER OPPORTUNITIES AND HAVE FAILED TO CARRY THROUGH ON THEIR BOASTS OF DECISIVE ACTION DURING THIS PERIOD. THE INSURGENTS OBVIOUSLY CONTINUE TO SUFFER FROM A LACK OF UNITY OF ACTION BETWEEN THE ELF AND THE PLF, WHICH STEMS NOT ONLY FROM IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES, BUT ALSO FROM ONGOING PERSONAL DISPUTES AMONG THE INSURGENT LEADERSHIP. THE SUCCESSES THAT THE INSURGENTS LAY CLAIM TO DURING THE PERIOD JUNE 1 TO MID-AUGUST HAVE BEEN DUE LARGELY TO EPMG MISMANAGEMENT OF THE "PEASANT MARCH", AND TO ETHIOPIAN FORCES' INACTIVITY AND DISAFFECTION.

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WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THE NEWLY-APPOINTED CHIEF ADMINISTRATOR,

MORALE AND CONTROL OF ETHIOPIAN TROOPS APPEAR TO HAVE IMPROVED AND THE SITUATION IN THE ASMARA AREA HAS STABILIZED. PEACE EFFORTS HAVE SHOWN SOME MOVEMENT, BUT FOR ALL THE SURFACE ACTIVITY, THERE HAVE BEEN LITTLE TANGIBLE RESULTS TO DATE.

2. THE INSURGENTS: THE PERIOD JUNE 1 TO MID-AUGUST HAS BEEN AN UNUSUAL TIME FOR THE ERITREAN INSURGENTS, AS IT OFFERED UNPARALLELED OPPORTUNITIES AND WITNESSED NOTABLE FAILURES TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THESE OPPORTUNITIES. DURING JUNE, THE MUCH-TOUTED "PEASANT MARCH" COLLAPSED LARGELY BECAUSE OF EPMG MISMANAGEMENT, ALTHOUGH INCREASING INSURGENT PRESSURES BOTH FROM ERITREAN REBELS AND TIGREAN DISSIDENTS WERE A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR. MUCH GOODWILL AND SOME TERRAIN WAS LOST BY THE EPMG, AND ROAD COMMUNICATION IN NORTHERN TIGRE AND SOUTHERN ERITREA BECAME APPRECIABLY MORE HAZARDOUS. YET THE FINAL WITHDRAWAL OF THE PEASANTS AND THE ABANDONMENT OF THE CAMPAIGN WAS NOT FOLLOWED BY DECISIVE INSURGENT SUCCESSES WHICH MIGHT EFFECT THE OUTCOME OF THE ERITREAN SECESSION. LIKEWISE, THE MOMENTARILY INTENSE ETHIOPIAN MILITARY DISSATISFACTION RESULTING FROM THE DEATH OF BG GETACHEW WAS NOT EXPLOITED BY INSURGENTS WHO APPEAR TO HAVE PREFERRED TO AWAIT THE OUTCOME OF EVENTS RATHER THAN PRESENT THEMSELVES AS A TARGET AGAINST WHICH VARIOUS ELEMENTS OF THE ETHIOPIAN FORCES MIGHT RALLY. THIS FAILURE OF THE INSURGENTS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE EPMG SETBACKS CAN BE ATTRIBUTED PRIMARILY TO A LACK OF UNITY BETWEEN THE ELF AND PLF. THIS CONTINUING SCHISM IS THE RESULT OF BOTH DIFFERING IDEALOGY BETWEEN THE RURAL, CONSERVATIVE, LARGELY MUSLIM ELF AND THE URBAN, MARXIST, LARGELY CHRISTIAN PLF. THESE DIFFERENCES HAVE BEEN COMPOUNDED BY PERSONAL CONFLICTS BETWEEN INSURGENT LEADERS, PARTICULARLY BETWEEN PLF FIELD COMMANDER ISSIAS AFEWORK AND OSMAN SALEH SABBE, PLF EXTERNAL LEADER WHO STILL HOLDS SOME INFLUENCE WITH THE ELF.

3. TACTICS: IN THE AREA OF TACTICS, INSURGENTS STILL FAIL TO ASSERT THEIR ADVANTAGES IN THEIR UNCHALLENGED CONTROL OF THE COUNTRY-SIDE. THEY RETAIN A CAPABILITY TO INTERDICT THE ROADS IN ERITREA, YET HAVE NOT DEFINITELY CLOSED ANY OF THE MAJOR ARTERIES. THE MASSAWA-ASMARA LIFELINE CONTINUES TO FUNCTION WITHOUT MAJOR INTERRUPTION. THERE HAS BEEN NO SIGNIFICANT DAYLIGHT FIGHTING IN ASMARA OR THE IMMEDIATE SURROUNDINGS SINCE THE MAJOR OUTBREAK IN FEBRUARY/MARCH OF 1975, LARGELY BECAUSE OF THE FEAR OF MASSIVE

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REPRISALS AGAINST THE CIVIL POPULATION. FOR THE SAME REASON, ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS AGAINST PROMINENT EPMG OFFICIALS HAVE DWINDLED TO A HALT DURING THE PERIOD CITED, ALTHOUGH LOW-LEVEL "INFORMERS" ARE STILL BEING "ELIMINATED". BOASTS OF INSURGENTS ALSO REFLECT A MORE REALISTIC APPROACH, AS REBELS NOW CLAIM THEY WILL FIRST SIEGE OUTLYING TOWNS BEFORE ATTEMPTING TO CAPTURE MAJOR POPULATION CENTERS. THIS TACTIC, OF COURSE, WILL REQUIRE SOME CONCRETE UNIFICATION OF EFFORTS AMONG INSURGENTS.

4. EPMG MILITARY: DURING THE JUNE TO MID-AUGUST PERIOD, ETHIOPIAN FORCES HAVE CONTINUED TO DEMONSTRATE A LACK OF INITIATIVE AND LEADERSHIP. WHATEVER MIGHT HAVE BEEN ACCOMPLISHED IN THIS AREA WOULD HAVE BEEN SEVERELY DAMAGED BY THE DEATH OF BG GETACHEW AT THE HADS OF THE DIRG. FOLLOWING HIS DEATH JULY 10, UNTIL THE ARRIVAL OF HIS SUCCESSOR, COL FIKRU, AUGUST 1, NOT ONLY WAS THERE INACTION ON THE PART OF THE TROOPS, BUT THERE WAS A DEMONSTRATED RELUCTANCE TO TAKE ANY RISKS, EVEN IN RELIEVING THEIR OWN BESIEGED GARRISONS. THIS SITUATION APPEARS TO BE IMPROVING WITH THE ARRIVAL OF COL FIKRU WHO HAS APPLIED A FIRM, THOUGH ALOOF, HAND ON THE MILITARY. THIS IMPROVEMENT CAN ALSO BE TRACED TO THE INFUSION OF SEVERAL BATTALIONS OF THE FLAME DIVISION TO STIFFEN THE MILITARY'S BACKBONE AND TO ASSURE THEIR LOYALTY TO THE DIRG. COL FIKRU'S APPROACH, ALTHOUGH HEAVILY-LADEN WITH SOCIALIST IDEALOGY, HAS BEEN TO INVOLVE ERITREANS IN THE SOLUTION OF THE ERITREAN PROBLEM AND PROMISING MILITARY RESTRAINT (AT LEAST IN ASMARA) IN RETURN. WHILE TRANSPORTATION DISRUPTION IN ERITREA REMAINS A MAJOR PROBLEM FOR THE EPMG MILITARY AUTHORITIES, EAL TRAFFIC TO ADDIS HAS SETTLED INTO A NORMAL SCHEDULE WITH THE ONLY SECURITY FEAR BEING THE POSSIBILITY OF INSURGENT AGENTS SNEAKING A BOMB INTO THE AIR FREIGHT. OTHERWISE EPMG DEFENSIVE POSITIONS AROUND THE AIRPORT HAVE FORESTALLED ANY INSURGENT ATTEMPT AGAINST FLIGHTS LANDING AND TAKING OFF.

5. PEACE EFFORTS: IT IS APPARENT THAT THE EPMG PLACES CERTAIN DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE TO FINDING A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT TO THE ERITREAN SITUATION. THEY HAVE ENCOURAGED THE COMMITTEE OF ERITREAN ELDERS TO MAKE CONTACT ON THREE OCCASIONS WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PLF AND THE ELF. THEY HAVE MADE FAVORABLE REFERENCES TO THESE MEETINGS AND ON AUGUST 14, COL FIKRU PERMITTED SOLOMON TEKLE, LEADER OF THE COMMITTEE TO ADDRESS A MEETING FIKRU HAD

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CONVOKED. SOLOMON TOLD THE ASSEMBLED COMMERCIAL AND UNION LEADERS THAT THE TALKS HAVE BEEN USEFUL AND WILL CONTINUE. LIKEWISE, MAJOR BERHANU, A DIRG MEMBER AND HEAD OF A COMMISSION TO DEAL WITH THE ERITREAN SITUATION, IS KNOWN TO BE CORRESPONDING WITH INSURGENT REPRESENTATIVES. THERE HAVE ALSO BEEN EFFORTS TO INVOLVE THE SUDANESE AND OTHER NATIONS IN THE REGION IN REACHING A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT IN ERITREA. TO DATE, THESE EFFORTS HAVE YIELDED LITTLE TANGIBLE RESULTS, UNQUESTIONABLY BECAUSE OF THE CONTINUING DISARRAY IN THE LEADERSHIP OF THE INSURGENTS. THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ELEMENT IN THESE PEACE EFFORTS IS THAT THEY NOW APPEAR TO DOMINATE EPMG THINKING, WHILE TALK OF A SOLELY MILITARY SOLUTION IS VERY MUCH MUTED.

6. COMMENT: BY ALL APPEARANCES, THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY SITUATION IN ERITREA HAS SETTLED BACK INTO STALEMATE. THE EMPHASIS

ON A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT IS GROWING, AND THE DESIRE FOR PEACE SEEMS GENUINE. BOTH THE INSURGENTS AND THE EPMG HAVE CONSIDERABLE MILITARY WHEREWITHALL, BUT DEMONSTRATE A CLEAR RELUCTANCE TO EMPLOY IT AT THIS TIME. BOTH SIDES HARBOR CERTAIN WEAKNESSES WHICH EFFECT THEIR ABILITY TO OBTAIN A SOLUTION TO THE SITUATION. IT IS IMPERATIVE, HOWEVER, THAT OBSERVERS MAINTAIN A PERSPECTIVE ON THE SITUATION AND NOT GIVE UNDUE SIGNIFICANCE TO LOW-LEVEL INSURGENT ACTIONS, WHICH, WHILE DISRUPTIVE, HAVE YET TO CRIPPLE ESSENTIAL ACTIVITY AND THE PROSPECTS FOR PEACE.
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